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Illustration for "In Necessity's Mortar"

CATHERINE DE VAUCELLES, IN HER GARDEN

In Necessity's Mortar

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

THERE went about the Rue St.-Jacques a notable shaking of heads on the day that Catherine de Vaucelles was betrothed to François de Montcorbier.

"Holy Virgin!" said the Rue St.-Jacques; "the girl is a fool. Why has she not taken Noël d'Arnaye—Noël the Handsome? I grant you Noël is an ass, but then he is of the nobility, look you. He has the Dauphin's favor. Noël will be a great man when our exiled Dauphin comes from Geneppe yonder to be King of France. Then, too, she might have had Philippe Sermaise. Sermaise is a priest, of course, and one may not marry a priest, but Sermaise has money, and Sermaise is mad for love of her. She might have done worse. But François! Eh, death of my life! what is François? Perhaps—he, he!—perhaps Ysabeau de Montigny might tell, you say? Perhaps, but I cannot. François is a kindly, peaceable lad enough, I dare say, but what does she see in him? He is a scholar?—well, the College of Navarre has furnished food for the gallows before this. A poet?—rhyming will not fill the pot. Rhymes are a thin diet for two lusty young folk like these. And who knows if Guillaume de Villon, his foster-father, has one *sou* to rub against another? He is canon at St.-Benoît-le-Bétourné yonder, but canons are not Midases. The girl will have a hard life of it, neighbor, a hard life, I tell you, if—he, he!—if Ysabeau de Montigny does not knife her some day. Eh, yes, Catherine has played the fool."

Thus far the Rue St.-Jacques.

This was on the day of the Fête-Dieu. It was on this day that Noël d'Arnaye blasphemed for a matter of a half-hour, and then went to the Crowned Ox, where he drank himself into a happy insensibility; that Ysabeau de Montigny, having wept a little, sent for Gilles Raguyer, a priest, and aforetime a rival

of François de Montcorbier for her favors; and that Philippe Sermaise grinned and said nothing. But afterward he gnawed at his under lip like a madman as he went about seeking for François de Montcorbier.

It verged upon nine in the evening—a late hour in those days—when François climbed the wall of Jehan de Vaucelles's garden.

A wall!—and what is a wall to your true lover? What bones, pray, did the *Sieur Pyramus*, that famous Babylonish knight, make of a wall? Did not his protestations slip through a chink, mocking at implacable granite and more implacable fathers? Most assuredly they did; and *Pyramus* was a pattern to all lovers. Thus ran the meditations of Master François as he leaped down into the garden.

He had not seen Catherine for three hours, you understand. Three hours! three eternities rather. In a patch of moonlight François paused and cut an agile caper, as he thought of that coming time when he might see Catherine every day.

"Madame François de Montcorbier," he said, tasting each syllable with gusto. "Catherine de Montcorbier. Was there ever a sweeter juxtaposition of sounds? It is a name for an angel. And an angel shall bear it—eh, yes, an angel, no less. O saints in Paradise, envy me! Envy me," he cried, with a heroical gesture toward the stars, "for François would change places with none of you to-night."

He crept through orderly rows of chestnuts and acacias to a window where a dim light burned. Then he unslung a lute from his shoulder and began to sing, secure in the knowledge that deaf old Jehan de Vaucelles was not likely to be disturbed by sound of any nature till that time when it should please God that the last trump be noised about the tumbling heavens.

It was good to breathe the mingled odor of roses and mignonette that was thick about him. It was good to sing to her a wailing song of unrequited love and know that she loved him. François dallied with his bliss, parodied his bliss, and lamented in the moonlight with as tuneful a dolor as Messire Orpheus may have evinced when he carolled in Hades.

Sang François:

"O Beauty of her, whereby I am undone!
O Grace of her, that hath no grace for me!

O Love of her, the bit that guides me on
To sorrow and to grievous misery!

O Beauty of her, my poor heart's enemy!

O Pride of her, that slays! O pitiless,
great,

Sweet Eyes of her! Have done with
cruelty!

Have pity upon me ere it be too late!

"Happier for me if elsewhere I had gone
For pity—ah, far happier for me,

Since never of her may any pity be won,
And, lest dishonor slay me, I must flee.

Haro! I cry (and cry how uselessly!):

Haro! I cry to folk of all estate,

For I must die unless it chance that she
Have pity upon me ere it be too late.

"A time draws on 'neath whose disastrous
sun

Your beauty's flower must fade and wane
and be

No longer beautiful, and thereupon

I may not mock at you—not I, for we
Shall both be old and vigorless;—*ma*

mie,

Drink deep of love, drink deep and do not
wait

Until love's spring run dry. Have pity
on me!

Have pity upon me ere it be too late!

"Lord Love, that all love's lordship hast in
fee,

Lighten, ah, lighten thy displeasure's
weight,

For all true hearts should, of Christ's
charity,

Have pity upon me ere it be too late."

Then, from above, a voice fluted in the twilight—a high, sweet, delicate voice: "You have mistaken the window, Monsieur de Montcorbier. Ysabeau de Montigny dwells in the Rue du Fouarre."

"Ah, cruel!" sighed François. "Will you never let that kite hang upon the wall?"

"It is all very well to groan like a bellows. Guillemette Moreau did not sup here for nothing. I know of the verses you made her—and the gloves you gave her at Michaelmas, too. St. Anne!" cried the voice, somewhat sharply; "she needed gloves badly enough. Her hands are raw beef. And the head-dress at Easter, too—she looks like the steeple of St.-Benoît in it. But every man to his taste, Monsieur de Montcorbier. Good night, Monsieur de Montcorbier." But for all that the window did not close.

"Catherine—" he pleaded; and under his breath he expressed uncharitable aspirations as to the future of Guillemette Moreau.

"You have made me very unhappy," said the voice, with a little sniff.

"It was before I knew you, Catherine. The stars are beautiful, *ma mie*, and a man may very reasonably admire them; but the stars vanish and are forgotten when the sun appears."

"But Ysabeau is not a star," the voice pointed out; "she is simply a lank, good-for-nothing, slovenly trollop."

"Ah, Catherine—"

"I believe you are still in love with her."

"Catherine—"

"Otherwise, you will promise me for the future to avoid her as you would the Black Death."

"Catherine, her brother is my friend. Catherine—"

"René de Montigny is, as all the Rue St.-Jacques knows, a gambler and a drunkard, and in all likelihood a thief. But you prefer the Montignys to me, it appears. An ill cat seeks an ill rat. Very heartily do I wish you joy of them. You will not promise? Good night, then, Monsieur de Montcorbier."

"Mother of God! I promise, Catherine."

From above, Mademoiselle de Vaucelles gave a luxurious sigh. "Dear François!" said she.

"You are a tyrant," he complained. "Madame Semiramis was not more cruel. Madame Herodias was less implacable, I think. And I think that neither was so beautiful."

"I love you," said Mademoiselle de Vaucelles.

"But there was never any one so many

fathoms deep in love as I. Love bandies me from the postern to the frying-pan, from hot to cold. Ah, Catherine, Catherine, have pity upon my folly! Bid me fetch you Prester John's beard, and I will do it; bid me believe the sky is made of calfskin, that morning is evening, that a fat sow is a windmill, and I will do it. Only love me a little, dear."

"My king, my king!" she murmured, with a deep thrill of speech.

"My queen, my tyrant! Ah, what eyes you have! Ah, pitiless, great, sweet eyes—sapphires that in the old days might have ransomed every monarch in Tamerlane's stable! Even in the night I see them, Catherine."

"Yet Ysabeau's eyes are brown."

"Then are her eyes the gutter's color. But Catherine's eyes are twin firmaments."

And about them the acacias rustled lazily, and the air was sweet with the odors of growing things, and the world, drenched in moonlight, slumbered. Without was Paris, but old Jehan's garden wall cloistered Paradise.

"Has the world, think you, known lovers, long dead now, that were once even as happy as we?"

"Love was not known till we discovered it."

"I am so happy, François, that I fear death."

"We have our day. Let us drink deep of love, not waiting until the spring run dry. Ah, Catherine, death comes to all, and yonder in the churchyard the poor dead lie together, hugger-mugger, and a man may not tell an archbishop from a ragpicker. Yet they have exulted in their youth, and have laughed in the sun with some frank lass. We have our day, Catherine."

"I love you!"

"I love you!"

So they prattled in the moonlight. Their discourse was no more overburdened with wisdom than has been the ordinary communing of lovers since Adam first awakened ribless. Yet they were content.

Fate grinned and went on with her weaving.

Somewhat later François came down the deserted street, treading on air. It

was a bland summer night, windless, moon-washed, odorful with garden scents; the moon, nearing its full, was a silver egg set on end ("Leda-hatched," he termed it: "one may look for the advent of Queen Helen ere dawn"); and the sky he likened to blue velvet studded with the gilt nail-heads of a seraphic upholsterer. François was a poet, but a civic poet; then, as always, he pilfered his similes from shop-windows.

But the heart of François was pure magnanimity, the heels of François mercury, as he tripped past the church of St.-Benoît-le-Bétourné, all snow and ink in the moonlight. Then with a jerk François paused.

On a stone bench before the church sat Ysabeau de Montigny and Gilles Raguyer. The priest was fuddled, hiccuping his amorous dithyrambics as he paddled with the girl's hand. "You tempt me to murder," he was saying. "It is a deadly sin, my soul, and I have no mind to fry in hell while my body swings on the St.-Denis road, a crow's dinner. Let François live, my soul. My soul, he would stick little Gilles like a pig." He began to blubber at the thought.

"Holy Macaire!" said François, "here is a pretty plot a-brewing." Yet, because his heart was filled just now with loving-kindness, he forgave the girl. "*Tantæne iræ?*" said François; and aloud, "Ysabeau, it is time you were abed."

She wheeled upon him in apprehension; then, with recognition, her eyes flamed. "Now, Gilles!" cried Ysabeau de Montigny; "now, coward! He is unarmed, Gilles. Look, Gilles! Kill for me this betrayer of women!"

Under his mantle François loosened the short sword he carried. But the priest plainly had no mind to the business. He rose, tipsily fumbling a knife, fear in his eyes, snarling like a cur at sight of a strange mastiff.

"Vile rascal!" said Gilles Raguyer, as he strove to lash himself into a rage. "O coward! O parricide! O Tarquin!"

François began to laugh. "Let us have done with this farce," said he. "Your man has no stomach for battle, Ysabeau. And you do me wrong, my lass, to call me a betrayer of women. Doubtless the tale served well enough to urge Gilles on; but you and I and

God know that naught has passed between us save a few kisses and a trinket or so. It is no knifing matter. Yet, for the sake of old time, come home, Ysabeau; your brother is my friend, and the hour is somewhat late for honest women to be abroad."

"*Enné?*" shrilled Ysabeau; "and yet, if I cannot strike a spark of courage from this lump here, there come those who may help me, François de Montcorbier. 'Ware Sermaise, Master François!"

François wheeled. Down the Rue St.-Jacques came Philippe Sermaise, like a questing hound, with drunken Jehan le Merdi at his heels. "Holy Virgin!" thought François, "this is likely to be a nasty affair. I would give a deal for a glimpse of the patrol lanterns just now."

He edged his way toward the cloister, to get a wall at his back. But Gilles Raguyer followed him, knife in hand.

"O hideous Tarquin! O Absolom!" growled Gilles; "have you no respect for churchmen?"

Then, with an oath, Sermaise ran up. "Heart of God!" he panted; "so I have found you at last! There is a certain crow needs picking between us two, Montcorbier."

Thus hemmed in by his enemies, François temporized. "Why do you accost me thus angrily, Master Philippe?" he babbled. "What harm have I done you? What is your will of me?" But his fingers tore feverishly at the strap by which his lute was swung over his shoulder, and presently it fell at his feet, leaving him unhampered and his sword-arm free.

This was fuel to the priest's wrath. "Sacred bones of Benoît!" he snarled, "I could make a near guess what window you have been caterwauling under." Then from beneath his gown he suddenly hauled out a rapier and struck at the boy while François was yet tugging at his sword.

Full in the mouth he struck him, splitting the lower lip through. François felt the piercing cold of the steel, the tingling of it against his teeth, then the warm, grateful spurt of blood; through a red mist he saw Gilles and Ysabeau run screaming down the Rue St.-Jacques.

He drew and made at Sermaise, for-

getful of le Merdi. It was shrewd work. Presently they were fighting in the moonlight, hammer and tongs, as the saying is, and presently Sermaise was cursing like a madman, for François had wounded him in the groin. Window after window rattled open as the Rue St.-Jacques ran nightcapped to peer at the brawl.

Then, as François drew back his sword to slash at the other's shaven head—Frenchmen had not yet learned to thrust with the point in the Italian manner—Jehan le Merdi leaped from behind, swift as a snake, and wrested away his sword. Sermaise closed with a glad cry.

"Heart of God!" cried Sermaise. "Pray, bridegroom, pray!"

But François jumped backward, tumbling over le Merdi, and then with apish celerity caught up a great stone and flung it with all his strength full in the priest's face.

The rest was hideous. For a single heart-beat Sermaise stood swaying on his feet, his outspread arms making a tottering cross, his face a black, formless horror, featureless, void. François, staring at him, began to choke. Then the man's wrists fell, and in the silence his rapier tinkled on the flagstones with the sound of breaking glass, and Philippe Sermaise slid down, crumpling like a broken toy. Afterward you might have heard a long, awed sibilance go about the windows overhead as the Rue St.-Jacques, watching, caught its breath again.

His heart hammering at his ribs, François de Montcorbier turned and ran. He cried like a beaten child as he went through the moon-washed Rue St.-Jacques, making strange whistling noises. His split lip was a clammy dead thing that flapped against his chin as he ran.

"François!" a man cried, meeting him; "ah, name of God, François!"

It was René de Montigny, lurching from the Crowned Ox, half tipsy. He caught the boy by the shoulder and hurried him, still sobbing, to Fouquet the barber-surgeon's, where they sewed up his wound. But in accordance with the police regulations, they first demanded an account of how he had received it. René lied up-hill and down-dale, while in a

corner of the room François cried monotonously.

Fate grinned and went on with her weaving.

The Rue St.-Jacques had toothsome sauce for its breakfast. The quarter smacked its lips over the news, as it pictured François de Montcorbier dangling from Montfaucon. "Horrible!" said the Rue St.-Jacques, and deduced a snug moral for the edification of the children.

Guillemette Moreau had told Catherine of the affair before the day was aired. The girl's wrath flamed.

"Sermaise!" said she. "Bah! what do I care for Sermaise? He killed him in fair fight. But within an hour, Guillemette—within an hour after leaving me he is junketing on church porches with that trollop. They were not there for holy water. Midnight, look you! And he swore to me—chaff, chaff, chaff! His honor is chaff, Guillemette, and his heart a bran-bag. Oh, swine, filthy swine! Eh, well, let the swine stick to his sty. Send Noël d'Arnaye to me."

Noël came, his head tied in a napkin.

"Eh?" said she, "another swine fresh from the gutter? Faugh! it is a bottle, a hogshead! Noël, I will marry you if you like."

He fell to mumbling her hand. An hour later she told Jehan de Vaucelles she intended to marry Noël the Handsome when he should come back from Geneppe with the exiled Dauphin. The old man, having wisdom, lifted his brows and then went back to his reading.

The patrol had taken Sermaise to the prison of St.-Benoît, where he lay all night. That day he was carried to the hospital of the Hôtel-Dieu. He died the following Saturday.

But death exalted the man to some nobility; before one of the apparitors of the Châtelet he exonerated Montcorbier, under oath, and asked that no steps be taken against him. "I forgive him my death," he said, manly enough at the last, "by reason of certain causes moving him thereunto." Then he demanded the glove they would find in the pocket of his gown. It was Catherine's glove. The priest kissed it, then began to laugh. Shortly afterwards he died, still gnawing at the glove.

François and René had vanished. "Good riddance," said the Rue St.-Jacques. But Montcorbier was summoned to appear before the court of the Châtelet to answer for the death of Sermaise, and in default of his appearance was subsequently condemned to banishment from the kingdom.

They were at St.-Pourçain-en-Bourbonnais, where René had kinsmen. Under the name of des Loges, François had there secured a place as tutor, but when he heard that Sermaise had cleared him of blame, he set about procuring a pardon. It was January before he succeeded in this.

Meanwhile he had learned a deal of René's way of living. "You are a thief," he said to him, the day his pardon came, "but you have played a kindly part by me. I think you are Dysmas, René, not Gestas. Eh, I throw no stones. You have stolen, but I have killed. Let us go to Paris, lad, and start afresh."

Montigny grinned. "I shall certainly go to Paris," he said. "My friends wait for me there—Guy Tabary, Petit Jehan, and Colin de Cayeux. We are planning to visit Guillaume Coiffier, a fat priest with some six hundred crowns in the cupboard. You will make one of the party, François."

"René, René," said he, "my heart bleeds for you."

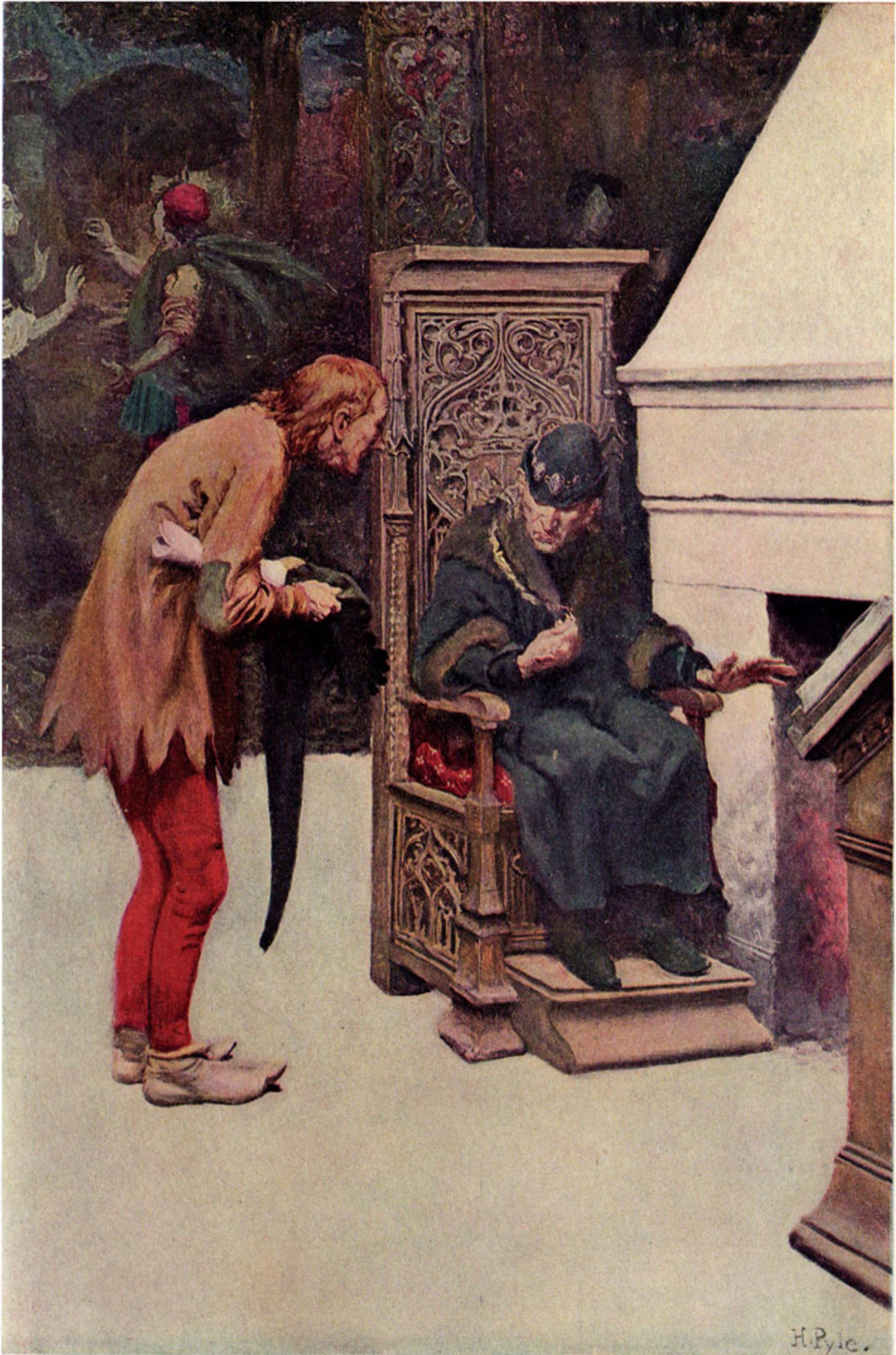
Again Montigny grinned. "You think a great deal about blood nowadays," he commented. "A man might take you for one of the Nine Worthies. Alexander! will you stable the elephant you took from Porus in the Rue St.-Jacques? Eh, my faith, let us first see what the Rue St.-Jacques has to say about it. After that I think you will make one of our party."

There was a light, crackling frost underfoot the day that François came back to the Rue St.-Jacques. A brisk, clear January day. It was good to be home again.

"Eh, Guillemette, Guillemette," he laughed. "Why, lass—"

"Faugh!" said Guillemette Moreau, as she passed him, nose high in air. "A murderer, a priest-killer."

Then the sun went black for François. It was a bucket of cold water, full in the



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"THE KING HIMSELF HAULED ME OUT OF GAOL"

face. He gasped, staring after her; and palsy Thomas Tricot, on his way from mass, nudged Martin Blaru in the ribs.

"Martin," said he, "fruit must be cheap this year. Yonder in the gutter is an apple from the gallows-tree, and no one will pick it up."

Blaru turned and spat out: "Cain! Judas!"

This was but a sample. Everywhere François found masklike faces and skirts drawn aside. A little girl in a red cap, Robin Troussecaille's daughter, flung a stone at him as he slunk into the cloister of St.-Benoît-le-Bétourné. In those days a slain priest was God's servant slain, no less.

"My father!" he cried, rapping upon the door of the Hôtel de la Porte-Rouge, "oh, my father, open to me, for I think that my heart is breaking!"

Presently his foster-father, Guillaume de Villon, came to the window. "Murderer!" said he. "Betrayer of women! Now, by the caldron of John! how dare you show your face here? I gave you my name and you soiled it. Back to your husks, rascal!"

"O God, O God!" François cried, as he looked up into the old man's implacable face. "You, too, my father!" He burst into a fit of sobbing.

"Go!" the priest stormed; "go, murderer!"

It was not good to hear François's laughter. "What a world we live in!" he giggled. "You gave me your name and I soiled it? Eh, Master Priest, Master Pharisee, beware! As God lives, I will drag that name through every muckheap in France."

Yet he went to Jehan de Vaucelles's house. "I will give God one more chance at my soul," he said.

In the garden he met Catherine and Noël d'Arnaye coming out of the house. They stopped short. Her face, half muffled in her cloak, flushed to a wonderful rose of happiness, her great eyes glowed, and Catherine reached out her hand to him with a glad little cry.

His heart was hot wax as he fell upon his knees before her.

"O heart's dearest, heart's dearest!" he cried, "forgive me that I doubted you!"

And then for an instant, I think, the

balance hung level. But after a while, "Monsieur d'Arnaye," said she, in a crisp voice, "thrash for me this betrayer of women."

Noël was a big, bluff man, half English, topping François by two feet. He lifted the boy by his collar, caught up a stick, and set to work. Catherine watched them, her eyes gemlike, cruel.

François did not move a muscle in resistance. God had chosen.

After a little, though, d'Arnaye flung François upon the ground, where he lay quite still for a moment. Then slowly he rose to his feet. He never looked at Noël. For a long time he stared at Catherine de Vaucelles, frost-flushed, defiant, incredibly beautiful. Afterward he went out of the garden, staggering like a drunken man.

He found Montigny at the Crowned Ox. "René," said he, "there is no charity on earth, there is no God in heaven. But in hell there is most assuredly a devil, and I think that he must laugh a great deal. What was that you were telling me about the priest with six hundred crowns in his cupboard?"

René slapped him on the shoulder. "Now," said he, "you talk like a man." He opened the door at the back and cried: "Colin, you and Petit Jehan and that pig Tabary may come out. I have the honor, messieurs, to offer you a new Companion of the Cockleshell."

When the Dauphin came from Geneppe to be crowned King of France, there rode with him Noël d'Arnaye and his brother Raymond. The news that Charles the Well-served was now servitor to Death brought the exiled Louis post-haste to Paris, where the Rue St.-Jacques turned out full force to witness his coronation. They expected Saturnian doings of Louis XI. in those days, a return of the Golden Age; and when the new King began his reign by granting Noël a snug fief in Picardy, the Rue St.-Jacques applauded.

"Noël has served him these ten years," said the Rue St.-Jacques; "it is only just. And now, neighbor, we may look to see Noël the Handsome and Catherine de Vaucelles make a match of it. The girl has a tidy dowry, they say; old Jehan turned out richer than the quar-

ter suspected. Eh, death of my life, yes! You may see his tomb in the Innocents' yonder, with weeping seraphim and a yard of Latin on it. I warrant you that rascal Montcorbier has lain awake in half the prisons in France thinking of what he flung away. Seven years, no less, since he and Montigny showed their thieves' faces here. Eh, the world wags, neighbor, and they say there will be a new tax on salt if we go to war with the English."

Somewhat to this effect also ran the meditations of Catherine de Vaucelles one hot August night as she sat at her window, overlooking the acacias and chestnuts of her garden. Noël, brave in blue and silver, had just gone down the Rue St.-Jacques, singing, clinking the fat purse whose stoutness was still a novelty to him. That evening she had given him her promise to marry him at Michaelmas.

It was a black night, moonless, windless. There were a scant half-dozen stars overhead, and the thick scent of roses and mignonette came up to her in hot, stifling waves. Below her the tree-tops conferred stealthily, and the fountain plashed its eternal remonstrance to the conspiracy they lisped of.

But after a while Catherine rose and stood contemplative before a long mirror that was in her room. Catherine de Vaucelles was twenty-five now, in the full flower of her beauty. Blue eyes the mirror showed her, far apart, unfathomable; honey-colored hair that hung heavily about her face, a mouth that curved in a petulant bow, a firm chin; only her nose left something to be desiderated,—for that feature, though well formed, was unduly diminutive, and bent by perhaps a hair's breadth to the left. She might very reasonably have smiled at what the mirror showed her; but, for all that, she sighed.

"O Beauty of her, whereby I am undone," said Catherine, wistfully; then on a sudden she burst into tearless sobbing. "Ah, God in heaven, forgive me for my folly! Sweet Christ, intercede for me who have paid so dearly for my folly!"

And like an echo to her thoughts stole through the open window the sound of a voice singing below.

Sang the voice:

"O Beauty of her, whereby I am undone!
O Grace of her, that hath no grace for me!
O Love of her, the bit that guides me on
To sorrow and to grievous misery!
O Beauty of her, my poor heart's enemy—"

and broke off in a fit of coughing.

She remained immovable for a matter of two minutes, her proud little head poised alertly. Then, with a gasp, she sprang to the gong and struck it seven or eight times.

"Macée, there is a man in the garden. Bring him to me, Macée—ah, love of God, Macée, make haste!"

Blinking, he stood upon the threshold. Then, without words, their lips met.

"My king!" said Catherine; "heart's emperor!"

"O rose of all the world!" he cried.

There was very little need of speech.

But after a moment she drew away and stared at him. François, though he was but thirty, seemed an old man now. His bald head shone in the candle-light. His face was a mesh of tiny wrinkles, wax white, and his lower lip, puckered by the scar of his wound, protruded in an eternal grimace. As Catherine looked at him, his faded eyes, half covered with blue film, shifted uneasily, and with a jerk he glanced backward over his shoulder. The movement started a cough tearing at his throat.

"Holy Macaire!" said he. "I thought Henri Cousin, the executioner, was at my heels. Why do you stare so, lass? Have you anything to eat? I am famished, Catherine."

Silently she brought him meat and wine. He fell upon it wolfishly. He ate with his front teeth, like a sheep.

When he had ended, Catherine came to him and took both his hands in hers and lifted them to her lips. "God, God, God!" she sobbed, and her voice was the voice of an old woman.

François pushed her away. Then he strode to the mirror and regarded it intently. With a snarl he turned about. "Yes," said he, "you killed François de Montcorbier as surely as Montcorbier killed Sermaise. Eh, Holy Virgin! that is scant cause for grief. You made



"VILLON—THE SINGER FATE FASHIONED TO HER LIKING"

François Villon. What do you think of him, lass?"

She echoed the name.

"Heart of God! You have not heard of François Villon? The Rue St.-Jacques has not heard of François Villon? Pigs, pigs, that dare not peer out of their sty! Why, I have capped verses with the Duke of Orléans. The very street-boys know my 'Ballad of the Women of Paris.' Not a drunkard in the realm but rants my 'Orison for Master Cotard's Soul' when the bottle passes. The King himself hauled me out of Meung gaol last September, swearing that in all France there was not my equal at a ballad. And you have never heard of me!" Once more a fit of coughing choked him.

She gave him a woman's answer: "I do not care if you are the greatest lord in the kingdom or the vilest thief that steals ducks from Paris Moat. I love you, François."

For a long time he stood silent, blinking, peering into her love-lit face almost quizzically. She loved him; no questioning that. But presently he put her aside and went slowly toward the open window. This was a matter for consideration.

The night was black as a pocket. Staring into it, François threw back his head and drew a deep, tremulous breath. The rising odor of roses and mignonettes, keen and intolerably sweet, had roused unforgotten pulses in his blood, had set his heart a-drum.

She loved him! Through all these years, with a woman's unreasoning faith, she had loved him, had trusted him. He knew well enough how matters stood between her and Noël d'Arnaye; the host of the Crowned Ox had been garrulous that evening. She was rich. Here for the asking was a competence, love, an ingleside of his own. And he knew that he dare not take it.

"Because I love her. Mother of God! has there been in all my life a day, an hour, a moment when I have not loved her! Just to see her once was all that I craved,—as a lost soul might crave one splendid glimpse of heaven's harps and lutes before the pit take him. And I find that she loves me—me! Fate must have her jest, I see, though the firmament

crack for it. She would have been content enough with Noël, thinking me dead. And with me? Ah, if I dared hope that this last flicker of life left in my crazy carcass might burn clear! I have but a little while to live; if I dared hope that I might live that little cleanly! But the next cup of wine, the next light woman? You know the answer, François Villon. And the matter rests with me. Choose, François Villon—choose between the old, squalid, foul life yonder and her happiness. Say if it be of greater import that you be saved from the gibbet or she be happy."

Staring into the darkness, he fought the battle out. Squarely he faced the issue; for a little while he saw François Villon as the last seven years had made him, saw the wine-sodden soul of François Villon, rotten and weak and honey-combed with vice. It had its moments of nobility; momentarily, as now, it might be roused to finer issues; but he knew that no power on earth could hearten it daily to curb the brutish passions. It was no longer possible for François Villon to live cleanly.

Then he turned to her with a crooked smile.

"Listen," said he. "Yonder is Paris—laughing, tragic Paris, who once had need of a singer to voice all her splendor and all her misery. Fate made the man; in necessity's mortar she pounded his soul into the shape Fate needed. To kings' courts she lifted him; to thieves' hovels she thrust him down; Lutetia's palaces and abbeys and taverns and lupanars and gutters and prisons and its very gallows—Fate dragged him past each in turn that he might make the Song of Paris. He could not have made it here in the smug Rue St.-Jacques. And now the song is made, Catherine. So long as Paris endures, François Villon will not be forgot. Villon the singer Fate fashioned to her liking; Villon the man she has damned, body and soul."

She gave a startled little cry and ran to him, her hands fluttering to his breast. "François!" she breathed.

It was not good to have to kill the love in her face.

"You loved François de Montcorbier. François de Montcorbier is dead. The Pharisees of the Rue St.-Jacques killed

him seven years ago. That day François Villon was born. That was the name I swore to drag through every muckheap in France. I have done it, Catherine. The Companions of the Cockleshell—eh, well, the world knows us. We robbed Guillaume Coiffier, we robbed the College of Navarre, we robbed the Church of St.-Maturin—the list is somewhat lengthy. René de Montigny's bones swing in the wind yonder at Montfaucon. Colin de Cayeux they broke on the wheel. The rest—in effect, I am the only one justice spared—because I had a gift of rhyming, they said. Pigs! if they only knew! I am immortal, lass. *Exegi monumentum*. Villon's glory and Villon's shame will never die."

He flung back his head and laughed harshly, a shabby, tragic figure. She had drawn away from him a little. But still the nearness of her, the faint perfume of her, shook in his veins, and still he must play this ghastly comedy to the end, since the prize he played for was her happiness.

"A thief—a common thief!" But again her hands fluttered back. "I drove you to it. Mine is the shame."

"Holy Macaire! what is a theft or two? Hunger that makes the wolf sally from the wood may well make a man do worse than steal. I could tell you— Ask in hell, of one Thevenin Pensete, who knifed him in the Cemetery of St. John," he hissed at her.

He hinted a lie, for it was Montigny who killed Thevenin Pensete. But Villon played without scruple now.

Catherine's face went white. "Stop," she pleaded; "no more, François—ah, Holy Virgin! do not tell me any more."

But after a little she came back to him, touching him with a curious loathing. "Mine was the shame. I drove you to this, François. If you still care for me, I will be your wife." Yet she shuddered.

He saw it. His face, too, was paper.

"He, he, he!" François laughed, horribly. "If I still love you! Eh, ask of Denise, of Jacqueline, of Pierrette, of Marion the Statue, of Jehanne of Brittany, of Blanche Slippermaker, of Fat

Peg—ask of any trollop in all Paris how François Villon loves. You thought me faithful! You thought I preferred you to any light o' love! Eh, the *credo* of the Rue St.-Jacques is somewhat narrow-minded. For my part, I find one woman much the same as another." And his voice shook, seeing how beautiful she was, seeing how she suffered. But he managed a laugh.

"I do not believe you," Catherine said, in muffled tones. "François! You loved me, François. Ah, boy, boy!" she cried, with a quick lift of speech; "come back to me, O boy that I loved."

It was a difficult business. But he grinned in her face.

"He is dead. Let François de Montcorbier rest in his grave. Your voice is very sweet, Catherine, and—and he could refuse you nothing, could he, lass? Ah, God, God, God!" he cried, in his agony, "why can you not believe me? I tell you Necessity pounds us in her mortar to what shape she will. I tell you that Montcorbier loved you, but François Villon prefers Fat Peg. An ill cat seeks an ill rat." And with this last great lie a sudden peace fell upon his soul, for he knew that he had won.

Her face told him that. Loathing. Loathing. He saw it there.

"I am sorry," said Catherine, dully. "I am sorry. Oh, for God's sake!" the girl wailed, on a sudden, "go, go! Do you want money? I will give you anything if you will only go. Oh, you beast! Oh, swine, swine, swine!"

He turned and went, staggering like a drunken man.

Once in the garden, he fell upon his face in the wet grass. About him the mingled odor of roses and mignonette was thick and intolerably sweet; the fountain plashed interminably in the night, and above him the chestnuts and acacias rustled and lisped as they had done seven years ago. Only he was changed.

"O Mother of God," the thief prayed, "grant that Noël may be kind to her! Mother of God, grant that she may be happy! Mother of God, grant that I may not live long!"